

Domestic Violence: Collateral Damage in the Era of Pandemic

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Received: April 08, 2020; **Accepted:** April 15, 2020; **Published:** April 17, 2020

R-Infotext Citation: Mylonaki E (2020) Domestic violence: Collateral damage in the era of pandemic. *Qrt J Womens & Nur* Volume 01(01): 1–3.

Abstract

The purpose of the article is to raise awareness of the correlations between increased domestic violence cases and social isolation in the wake of the COVID 19 pandemic and by doing so to outline the need to re-access the existing framework for dealing with domestic violence cases in order to develop a system that may be in place for the protection of victims of domestic violence in the unlikely event of future outbreaks of pandemic or natural disasters.

Introduction

The COVID 19 recently declared pandemic has led to a number of strict measures adopted globally in an effort to contain the spread of the virus and minimize its global impact. With the increased number of deaths recorded the majority of nations increasingly adopted measures ranging from social distancing to complete lockdowns of regions or whole nations. Despite the fact that such action deemed absolutely necessary in the current circumstances it has also revealed an alarming threat of increased cases of domestic violence. Given the fact that absolute lockdowns result in individuals being isolated at home poses the question whether the COVID 19 pandemic may lead to a ‘domestic abuse pandemic’ as vulnerable individuals are expected to reside with their abuser during the lockdown period.¹ The purpose of the article is to raise awareness of the correlations between domestic violence cases and social isolation and by doing so to reveal the need to re-access the existing framework for dealing with domestic violence cases in order to develop a system that may be in place in the unlikely event of future outbreaks of pandemic or natural disasters. Likewise, the purpose

of the article is two- fold. To highlight a worrying trend and to suggest that early domestic violence preventive mechanisms should be ready to be activated in case of any future disasters.

The Outbreak of COVID 19 and Domestic Violence

The recent outbreak of COVID 19 throughout the world led to the declaration of a global pandemic by the World Health Organization on the 11th March 2020, pointing out that ‘more and more countries are now experiencing clusters of cases or community transmission’² and urging states to escalate their responses in such a way as to take pre-emptive action wherever possible in order to delay the pandemic³. In the days following such a declaration states on a unilateral basis and following up on the urgent call by WHO to detect, test, treat, isolate and track contains

² Statement made by Statement by Dr Hans Henri P. Kluge, WHO Regional Director for Europe, found at: <http://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/health-emergencies/coronavirus-covid-19/news/news/2020/3/who-announces-covid-19-outbreak-a-pandemic>

³ *ibid*

¹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-52076789> accessed on 5th of April 2020

and mobilize in response to the pandemic⁴, adopted a number of measures such as quarantines and social distancing as well as absolute lockdown of whole countries globally. Although particular countries faced with severe spread of COVID 19 such as China⁵ Italy⁶ and Spain⁷ were amongst the first to adopt strict lockdown measures in order to contain the spread of the virus it was soon globally realised by most states⁸ that national lockdowns could be the only viable mechanism to minimize the impact of the pandemic.⁹

Despite the fact that such measures exhibit an ability to contain the spread of the virus¹⁰, their impact on various aspects of life has also been felt as certain adjustments had to be made in terms of workplace, education and social interaction. At the same time, a number of voices are warning that the adopted measures could potentially lead to an increased number of domestic violence cases due to the restriction of individuals within the household. In fact, recent statistical information revealed the worrying trend,¹¹ and triggered a number of governmental statements in order to re-assure that victims of domestic violence will not be forgotten during the COVID 19 crisis.¹² Moreover, previously conducted research on the association between natural disasters and domestic

violence reveals that there is indeed a strong correlation between natural disasters and increased cases of domestic violence.¹³ The existing literature suggests that in the event of either natural disasters or man-made crisis¹⁴ there is evidence to suggest an increased level of domestic violence cases. In an attempt to further appreciate the links between disasters and domestic violence the WHO had previously highlighted the correlation between domestic violence and natural disasters by outlining that the effects have both an immediate and a long-term impact on violence: increased stress and feelings of powerlessness due to bereavement, loss of property and loss of livelihood; mental health problems such as post-traumatic stress disorder; the scarcity of basic provisions and the destruction of social networks.¹⁵ As it is suggested by existing literature, 'personal threats to life, loss of loved ones, property loss, immense destruction, breakdown of social security systems, collapse of social cohesion and harmony and so on, are the most important reasons behind this trend and diverse studies highlight that the effects of catastrophic disasters on mental health are larger than mild ones.¹⁶ Despite the fact that existing literature highlights the association between interpersonal violence and natural disaster,¹⁷ it should be stressed out that such research is quite limited and fails to provide a conclusive account of the steps that need to be adopted in order to break the links between disasters and increased levels of domestic violence.

In an attempt to fully appreciate the aforementioned associations one can turn to existing criminological

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/11/who-declares-coronavirus-pandemic>, accessed on the 17th March 2020

⁵ "Wuhan lockdown 'unprecedented', shows commitment to contain virus: WHO representative in China". Reuters. 23 January 2020.

⁶ Bruno, Luca; Winfield, Nicole (22 February 2020). "Italian towns on lockdown after 2 virus deaths, clusters". CTV News. Accessed 8 March 2020.

⁷ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/coronavirus-spain-news-nationwide-lockdown-emergency-covid-19-a9402166.html>, accessed 10th April 2020

⁸ <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/italy-and-spain-glimpse-a-way-out-of-coronavirus-lockdown-09qqc6267>

⁹ Dipasupil, Jan Paolo (15 March 2020). "COVID-19 Crisis Management and Prevention Plan". COVID-19 Crisis Management and Prevention Plan. Retrieved March 21, 2020.

¹⁰ <https://news.sky.com/story/coronavirus-china-reports-no-new-covid-19-deaths-for-first-time-during-outbreak-11969881>

¹¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/06/world/coronavirus-domestic-violence.html> accessed on the 7th of April 2020, See also: <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-health-coronavirus-spain-domestic-vio/calls-to-spains-gender-violence-helpline-rise-sharply-during-lockdown-idUKKBN21J57A> accessed on the 25th of March 2020

¹² <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/27/home-more-dangerous-coronavirus-isolation-domestic-violence/>

¹³ Violence and Gender VOL. 5, NO. 2, The Impact of Natural Disasters on Domestic Violence: An Analysis of Reports of Simple Assault in Florida (1999–2007), Sera Gearhart, et al Published Online: 1 Jun 2018.

¹⁴ Demography. 2016 Apr; 53(2): 471–505, Intimate Partner Violence in the Great Recession

Daniel Schneider, Kristen Harknett, and Sara McLanahan

¹⁵ https://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/publications/violence/violence_disasters.pdf

¹⁶ See relatively: Norris FH, Perilla JL, Riad JK, Kaniasty K, Lavizzo EA. Stability and change in stress, resources, and psychological distress following natural disaster: Findings from hurricane Andrew. *Anxiety Stress Coping*. 1999; 12: 363–96. See also:

¹⁷ Fisher S. Violence against women and natural disasters: Findings from post-tsunami Sri Lanka. *Violence Against Women*. 2010; 16: 902–18. Finally see: Anastario M, Shehab N, Lawry L. Increased gender-based violence among women internally displaced in Mississippi 2 years post-Hurricane Katrina. *Disaster Med Public Health Prep*. 2009; 3: 18–26.

theories suggesting that isolation is a key tool utilized by perpetrators of domestic violence¹⁸. As it has been recently argued 'while in lockdown or self-isolation, women and children are likely to be spending concentrated periods of time with perpetrators, potentially escalating the threat of domestic abuse and further restricting their freedom'¹⁹. Moreover, according to stress theory family violence is the result of stressors whether economic, social, or personal, that affect families at all levels.²⁰ According to the theory an increase in stress levels and tensions in the household may increase further the risk of abuse of vulnerable individuals. In the current COVID 19 climate where the life of the nations is severely affected and people isolate at home, stress levels and anxiety might increase and function as a contributing factor to domestic violence cases. However, it is too early to suggest that individuals with no prior inclination to domestic violence may turn violent in the wake of COVID 19 and further research is essential in order to assess the effect of the recent dramatic life changes on individuals with no prior violent interpersonal behaviour.

Domestic violence is a persistent problem globally and has triggered a number of suppressive responses at national levels existing long before COVID 19. However, as the current outbreak demonstrates the existing system in place is not capable of securing a safe place for victims of domestic violence. This is evident by the increased reported domestic violence cases. Therefore, it is suggested that the emphasis should be placed on developing preventive mechanisms in order to address violence prior to any disaster rather than dealing with the problem in the aftermath of any disaster. In fact, clear guidelines should be adopted prior to the state of emergency in order to be in place for the future.

Conclusion

The data available to the present day reveal an increasing trend in the cases of domestic violence during COVID 19 pandemic. Although we need to produce more data in order to make conclusive remarks on the association between domestic violence and the pandemic it is suggested that further research needs to be conducted in due course in order to reveal the true extent of such associations. Such research could potentially inform the development of future preventive programmes that could be in place in the unlikely event of future disasters. At the present state of affairs and with the number of deaths increasing globally on a daily basis the focus is placed on managing the public health emergency as a top priority. What remains to be seen is the process by which we can ensure that the health emergency does not trigger a domestic violence wave with long term effects.

¹⁸ The Relationship Between Mothers' Social Networks and Severe Domestic Violence: A Test of the Social Isolation Hypothesis, Carol Cooley, *Violence and Victims*, Volume 22, Number 4, 2007. See also: ielsen, J. M., Endo, R. K., & Ellington, B. L. (1992). Social isolation and wife abuse: A research report. In E. C. Viano (Ed.), *Intimate violence* (pp. 49–59). Washington, DC: Hemisphere.

¹⁹ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/coronavirus-uk-domestic-abuse-helpline-lockdown-isolation-a9449236.html>

²⁰ The application of stress theory to the study of family violence: Principles, problems, and prospects, Keith Farrington, *Journal of Family Violence* volume 1, pages 131–147(1986)

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